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C O N F I D E N T I A L TOKYO 002095

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EWWT](#) [KS](#) [KN](#) [JA](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTH KOREAN AMBASSADOR ON TERRITORIAL DISPUTE
WITH JAPAN

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons:1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During an April 18 meeting with the Ambassador, South Korean Ambassador to Japan Ra stated that:

-- Seoul would adamantly oppose Japanese plans to map the area surrounding the disputed Tokdo/Takeshima islands;

-- South Korea and Japan could come to blows if bilateral frictions were not resolved;

-- the United States would be drawn into a conflict between Japan and South Korea;

-- South Korea would begin to focus on the DPRK kidnapping issue;

-- Japanese political leaders were to blame for the currently difficult bilateral relations.

End Summary.

Territorial Dispute

¶2. (C) On April 18 in a previously scheduled lunch South Korean Ambassador Ra Jong Yil asserted to the Ambassador that the South Korean government would adamantly oppose Japanese plans to conduct maritime mapping of undersea topographical features near the disputed Tokdo/Takeshima Islands (known in the United States as the Liancourt Rocks). Ambassador Ra related that in a recent meeting, Japanese VFM Yachi had told him that if South Korea would desist from raising the naming of the sea bottom at an upcoming meeting of a relevant international organization, then Japan would pull back its plans to explore the area. However, noted Ra, if Japan had wanted an amicable settlement, it would not have mentioned this offer to the media, making it difficult for South Korea to back off. (Note: septel reports POL M/C's meeting with MOFA Asian Affairs DDG Umeda on this issue. End note.)

¶3. (C) Ambassador Ra averred that South Korea's claims to the Tokdo Islands were a strongly emotional issue for the South Korean people, but only a minor matter for Japan. The South Korean people would not allow any government, no matter how strong, to enter into negotiations on the issue. Should the troubled bilateral relationship continue to drift along its present course, hostilities would inevitably follow, Ra insisted. Observing that the region was not stable enough to deal with the increasing tensions between Japan and South Korea, Ra opined that the United States would be drawn into the dispute, noting that many in South Korea believe Japan

can only afford to act in such an "arrogant" manner because of its alliance with the United States. He stated that if the matter came to "blows," North Korean leader Kim Jong Il would be the ultimate beneficiary as it would enable him to play the nationalist card.

¶4. (C) Asserting that Japan could "easily" show flexibility on the issue by retracting its maritime mapping plans, Ambassador Ra said "serious" bilateral discussions could follow when the atmosphere had improved. He expressed hope for improved bilateral relations once PM Koizumi completes his term of office in September. Ambassador Schieffer stated that both Japan and South Korea were good friends and allies of the United States, and that we sought to promote good relations between the two countries.

DPRK Kidnapping

¶5. (C) Awareness of the DPRK kidnapping issue is growing in South Korea, Ambassador Ra observed. Having made a significant emotional investment in the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea, South Korea found it difficult to confront North Korean human rights issues, but the crimes of the Pyongyang regime could no longer be ignored and South Korea will begin to focus on the kidnapping issue. At an upcoming ministerial meeting with the North, Seoul will offer economic assistance to Pyongyang in exchange for the release of all the South Koreans held by the DPRK, including some 500 kidnapping victims and another 500 prisoners of war. Ambassador Ra said he had strongly urged the South Korean participant in the talks to press North Korea to resolve the Japanese kidnapping issue as well. Ambassador Schieffer replied that such help would undoubtedly be welcomed by Japan and related the strongly supportive and emotional Japanese reaction to his recent visit to a kidnapping site in Niigata.

South Korea/Japan Relations

¶6. (C) South Koreans should be the first to empathize with the Japanese people over the kidnapping issue, Ra opined, having suffered greatly themselves at the hands of the DPRK. However, he noted, the Japanese political leadership had created a lot of friction in the bilateral relationship. Ra recalled that when he accepted his appointment as Ambassador to Japan, President Roh had told him he wanted sound relations with Japan. Roh promised to hold twice yearly summit meetings with PM Koizumi and not to raise history issues. At first, President Roh kept his word, but nationalist statements by Japanese leaders, the Prime Minister's Yasukuni shrine visits, the Tokdo islands dispute, and troublesome wording in Japanese history textbooks had been too provocative. Japan does not understand the depth of feeling of all those who were hurt by the Japanese prior to 1945, he stated.

¶7. (C) Asked what South Korea would find as an acceptable solution to the dispute over Yasukuni Shrine, Ambassador Ra replied that Seoul's minimal position was a commitment by the Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary and Foreign Minister not to visit the war-related shrine. He noted that South Korea felt it had an understanding with Japan that the government would seriously consider the establishment of a national war memorial that Japanese leaders (and even foreign visitors) could visit instead of Yasukuni shrine. However, the Koizumi administration did not even include funds in the budget to study the proposal, he lamented.

SCHIEFFER